# The role of government in determining the school history curriculum: lessons from Australia

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**Executive Summary**

- There are significant similarities between problems faced over national identity and the interpretation of the past in Australia and England.
- The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) curriculum published in December 2010 offers useful templates for consideration, including setting the nation into a wider regional and global context, examining milestones alongside questions, and looking at a wide chronology across Foundation to Year 10.
- Britain's Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove has admitted to a strongly ideological stance over school history, but he would be unwise to insist that teachers of history stick to a particular interpretation.
- There are differences in approach between Simon Schama, Niall Ferguson and Sir David Cannadine, the three historians advising Michael Gove. There is a danger of creating conflicting policy discourses when historians working on the history curriculum conduct individual campaigns in the press.
- Teachers have to decide for themselves whether they wish to approach the past with a strong interpretational slant (Ferguson), with an eye for a story that is intrinsically interesting (Schama), or whether they can choose a pathway that avoids - in Cannadine's terms - 'irreconcilable simplicities'.

- The recent Ofsted report on school history offers many insights and clues about what is currently wrong and what could be corrected.
- Governments need to be very wary of being seen to privilege a particular interpretation of the past.

## *The new Australian history curriculum*

Last December, after deliberations that were initiated by a Liberal (though broadly conservative) Government under Prime Minister John Howard late in 2005, Australia published its national history curriculum. It had already been decided that history would be a 'core' subject, alongside English, mathematics and science. In many ways what has emerged in Australia is a triumph of the Centre after a bitter quarrel between Left and Right over the interpretation of Australia's past. Broadly speaking the two camps were named by each other as 'Whitewash' and 'Black Armband', with one celebrating the triumph of Western democracy, and the other emphasising its drawbacks, especially the history of indigenous relations. This was a classic 'history wars' scenario, a conflict over school history involving neo-conservative and liberal interpretations of the past, or of approaches to teaching, or both. Australia certainly experienced this, and Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark's best selling *The History Wars* sought to tell the background story of this heated set of disagreements. Professor Macintyre, a former member of the Communist Party, was later chosen to lead the curriculum reform.

Governments act as brokers, even honest brokers, in enabling a multi-faceted debate about content and methods and associated pupil age-related issues, like who should study what and when. There are five sets of stakeholders in this debate: the politicians, their civil servants and their school inspectors; the general public, parents and school governors; historians; teachers of history at secondary and primary level (where they are also teachers of everything else) and school communities; and history teacher educators, a hybrid breed of teacher-academics. Of course, looking on and provoking further debate are the media.

Australia had two attempts to get it right, and the first, under Prime Minister John Howard, and coinciding with the dying days of his administration, was abandoned when Labor decided to introduce history as part of a complete national curriculum package, with history being taught and learnt from Foundation to Y10. Howard had wanted national history to be taught in detail to all school students but only at the senior stage of school. His purpose was clear: to seek to define a nationally-unifying narrative with some awareness of outside influences (like the Enlightenment) and of inclusion issues. His list of milestones had been perceived by teacher educators like Tony Taylor to be too long, too detailed and thus impractical, with some esoteric inclusions that reflected his personal interest in cricket. Taylor insisted that the curriculum be teachable, doable and sustainable.

Nevertheless even the Left (in this debate Tony Taylor must be counted as being in the Centre, not the Left) cannot criticise the sincerity of Howard's motivation for wanting there to be more history in schools - a mood-change emerging after the 2002 Bali Bombings and the 2005 'Skips and Lebs' Cronulla riots between young Australians of Anglo-Celtic and Lebanese origin. His way of approaching it ultimately did not work, but lessons were drawn from the first 'experiment' which proved useful to the Kevin Rudd Labor Government (taken over by Julia Gillard in July 2010).

## *Milestones with questions*

What is being described is a process of negotiation, for the sake of school students, between two polarised sets of narratives, or in another sense between a narrative (the supremacy of Western democracy with an affirmation of Enlightenment values) and a counter-narrative (post-modern, post-colonial interpretations of settlement and unsettlement, drawing on counter-Enlightenment narratives). It took the insight - perhaps even genius - of a member of the August 2006 History Summit, John Hirst of La Trobe University, to demonstrate how milestones could be transformed by the use of questions - for example:

> How did a convict society change into a free society?
> What were the relations between Aborigines and settlers?
> Why did Australia become so prosperous?
> What were the relations between men and women?
> What were the plans and dreams for Australian society?

In *The Shortest History of Europe* Hirst showed his mastery of compressed narrative with a keen eye for irony. His other work on Australia juxtaposes 'colonial' and 'democracy', hinting that these are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

But this was only a start. The other decisions that led to the 8 December 2010 history curriculum were equally crucial. Australian history would not be nationalistic, the nation would be contextualised regionally and globally. Ancient history would be a part of the Foundation (Early Years) to Year 10 course, but it would include the early history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as well as opportunities to examine the ancient histories of both European and non-European societies. Medieval (in the sense of post-ancient) history would be a compulsory element but would similarly not be exclusively European. There would be a double chance to study Australian history at both primary and secondary stages, in the spirit of an introduction followed by a more in-depth study. This is a spiralled, not a linear, chronological model.

There would be overviews for ancient, medieval and modern, and after those several choices or studies in-depth. The significance of the East both as a neighbour and as an economic factor, was recognised, as ACARA's Rationale states:

> It also helps students to appreciate Australia's distinctive path of social, economic and political development, its position in the Asia-Pacific region, and its global interrelationships. This knowledge and understanding is essential for informed and active participation in Australia's diverse society.

Importantly, the curriculum included historical skills and key inquiry

questions for F-Y10: chronology, terms and concepts; historical questions and research; analysis and use of sources; perspectives and interpretations; explanation and communication.

The emergence of this curriculum as federal solution was a departure from past practice. In most states, with the notable exception of New South Wales, history had been taught only within a social studies framework, with varying degrees of success. As in New Zealand after their Thomas Report of 1943, social studies was seen as being more socially relevant than history, a subject that was believed to be elitist, badly taught and transmitting colonialist values. The neo-Deweyan ideals of social studies were about the present and the future. However, in twenty-first century Australia questions were being asked about why young people did not know enough history.

In a comparative study of teenagers' attitudes to school history in Canada and Australia, Anna Clark expresses doubt about the validity of complaints about youth appreciation of milestone-based 'factual', 'national historical literacy' type of history. In her interviews she explored students' awareness of other ways of learning history, especially the more inquiry-based history, grounded in active learning. However others would argue (namely Simon Schama, below) that storytelling is an essential precursor of debate.

In many ways the ACARA curriculum steers a judicious course between these two types of history, because the aims of the curriculum are not solely to teach the history of the nation. The nation's history is set into wider contexts as students get older, and alongside the learning about the content (the substantive knowledge) is the learning using and developing historical skills (the syntactic knowledge); in Gilbert Ryle's terms, both 'know that' and 'know how'.

## *What lessons for England and the rest of the UK?*

Michael Gove is undertaking a curriculum review which includes primary and secondary history. Although Gove is a Conservative, earlier in his

career he did not disguise his admiration for Tony Blair's New Labour project, with its ideological leanings to Anthony Giddens' rather ambiguous social democratic 'Third Way'. Although the national curriculum was reviewed for Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 in 1999-2000 and for Key Stage 3 in 2008, New Labour did not make many positive interventions on behalf of school history. In fact by their promoting of the literacy and numeracy strategies, history could be seen to have been neglected by the Blair and even by the Brown Governments, although Gordon Brown's British-ness addresses of 2004 and 2006 resonate with Australian expressions of concern about national identity made by John Howard.

However, the training of serving teachers in England for any new initiatives did not happen. In 2008, Key Stage 3 history received a loosening-up treatment with more choice left to schools about how to approach it. Gove has nevertheless decisively rejected the Rose Review (2009) on the primary curriculum, which although it promised a much more flexible and cross-curricular approach to the teaching and learning of primary history, also represented a move away from subjects and seemed to be a cyclical return, after years of curriculum prescription, to a more progressive approach. There are some contradictions here, for example because Shahed Ahmed, Head of Elmhurst Primary School, Forest Gate, and Review Advisory Committee member, has said: 'It would also be very helpful if the National Curriculum is slimmed down so that schools have more time and flexibility to fit in what else they think it important to have in their own school curriculum'. But nevertheless the commitment to a subject-based curriculum has been re-asserted. Gove has stated his support for the ideas of American educationalist, E.D. Hirsch, Jnr., presumably the beliefs about core knowledge and cultural literacy. Hirsch's school world provides opportunities to enhance the cultural capital or literacy that may be lacking in the family.

> I am a fan of E.D. Hirsch and Lindsay Paterson, two great social democratic thinkers on education. I'm also inspired by the ideals of the Democratic Intellect, the Scottish Enlightenment project of spreading

> knowledge more widely.

Attempts to reform the English school system have in many ways reflected a conflict between intellectualism and psychological harmony, especially in the primary sector in debates since the time of Plowden about subjects or curriculum integration. Work that had been running parallel with the now rejected Rose Review was the Cambridge Review, Robin Alexander's research-based and independent review of the primary curriculum (2010, but available in late 2009). Two things stand out from this report: his strong belief in teaching as a research-based profession, and his conviction that talk (dialogic teaching and learning) was a much-underrated factor in primary education. About the sanctity or structure of subjects little was said that offered clues to a politician hungry for subject-based reform, except perhaps that less structure was better than more, as in Sweden.

## *Niall Ferguson, Simon Schama and Sir David Cannadine: campaigns in the media*

Less than a month after Gove's appointment, he became embroiled in a short-lived controversy about school history, sparked by his spontaneous invitation, from the floor of the 2010 Hay Literary Festival to historian and TV celebrity Niall Ferguson to join the battle over the curriculum. Ferguson had already expressed his concern about school history, offering his convictions about a suitable master narrative of Western supremacy. To *The Guardian* the Minister's invitation was a dream chance to stir trouble. But the sense of *déjà vu* to those familiar with Australian debates is remarkable. Writing in late March 2011, we have access to both Ferguson's book and his Channel 4 television series, to establish without doubt his beliefs vis-à-vis schools and teachers on the one hand, and his master narrative on the other. In the end Gove did not place the imperial crown on Ferguson's head, and instead it was given to Simon Schama, dubbed by the media the 'history tsar'. But it appears that both are working on it, one known to the press, the other less overtly. Schama's approach is that of 'history from the inside', more sensitive about inclusivity, but he too

has strong views about history teaching.

Ferguson is clear about his aims: the story itself is one of arrested Western supremacy. The subtext is that if we do not recognise how the supremacy happened in the first place and also what precious things we once used so effectively (the six 'Killer Applications': competition, science, property rights or 'the rule of law', medicine, the consumer society, and the work ethic), we will be in danger of losing them. According to Ferguson, teachers are in the front-line of civilization here and now in providing a historical education for the future of a property-owning democracy which will or could ensure the survival of a much-loved way of life. In many ways this is a convincing argument, but in its detail there may be a tendency to replace or supplement understanding with a narrative of exceptionalism which impedes historical debate. The drive westwards in the story of the United States where new settlers had an opportunity to acquire land and then become voters, shows how much better the North Americans were than their counterparts in South America where land was kept in very few hands, the less wealthy were politically disempowered, and where it was impossible to achieve a federated republic of assorted states.

Schama, on the other hand, listed six key events (not applications, although many of them involved killing or dying unpleasantly): Murder in the Cathedral; the Black Death, and the Peasants' Revolt in the reign of Richard II; the execution of King Charles I; the Indian Moment; the Irish Wars; the Opium Wars and China. Somehow this approach provides a counter-narrative to the unmistakably Whig Fergusonion meta-narrative. But apart from this he stated his position:

> My own anecdotal evidence suggests that right across the secondary school system our children are being short-changed of the patrimony of their story, which is to say the lineaments of the whole story, for there can be no true history that refuses to span the arc, no coherence without chronology. A pedagogy that denies that completeness to children fatally misunderstands the psychology of their receptiveness, patronises their capacity for wanting the epic of long time; the hunger

> for plenitude.... It is, after all, the glory of our historical tradition - again, a legacy from antiquity - that storytelling is not the alternative to debate but its necessary condition.

This is in contrast to Anna Clark's analysis of the situation in Canada and Australia, where storytelling and debate seem to be presented as alternatives. Schama clearly believes that they are interdependent.

Joining Ferguson and Schama as key advisors to Michael Gove is Sir David Cannadine who, as Director of the Institute of Historical Research, led a Linbury Trust research project into the history of history teaching, and is acutely aware of the potential for political interference in the history curriculum, citing examples from Russia and Texas. In a BBC series he stated:

> As is often the case, there seem to be two irreconcilable views: those who want the history syllabus to stress national endeavour and achievement, and those who want it to recognise the failings and blemishes which invariably besmirch any country's historical record. In this particular case, the correspondence soon degenerated into a far from edifying disagreement as to whether the British Empire had been a 'good thing' or a 'bad thing' - viewpoints which, in their irreconcilable simplicities, might have come straight out of *1066 and All That*.
> There's no doubt that proponents of both of these interpretations of our national past can find ample historical evidence to support the very different arguments they are making. But it's more important - and it's much more difficult - to try to strike some sort of balance between them than it is to adopt either of these deeply entrenched adversarial positions.

Indeed the three historians advising Gove have different positions, and David Cannadine realises that a teacher of history's role is not just to 'deliver' one approved interpretation, but to negotiate between them with epistemic virtue and honesty. England and Wales and indeed Northern Ireland have had national curricula for history since the early 1990s. In Australia this is new. Michael Gove's curriculum review is the first serious

effort to review the curriculum since Dearing in the mid-1990s. The 'nation' of Australia might be seen to date either from the first evidence of Aborigine and Torres Islander peoples between 40,000 to 60,000 years ago, or from the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788. England, and the rest of the UK, has a written history that is much longer, and curriculum designers are presented with the problem of 'how much?' and 'to which age groups?' and 'in what depth?'

## *The Ofsted Report and ideas for the new curriculum*

In a 2011 Ofsted report the problem of the 'episodic' nature of units in Key Stage 2 History (Y3 - Y6) is highlighted. Given the time allowable for history it would be difficult to find a solution that did not involve more teaching of overviews or bridging narratives. Currently Key Stage 2 national history has some significant gaps (the Middle Ages, 1066-1485, the Stuarts and Georgians,1603-1837, and the early twentieth century 1901-1930). The provision of bridging narratives, especially of the two longer periods, would require a reshaping of the curriculum, unless the Minister is persuaded that a thematic approach (along the lines of Niall Ferguson's six 'killer applications') is necessary. At Key Stage 3 ancient history is missing, whereas it can be found at Key Stage 2 (Ancient Greece, a choice of one of seven non-European societies from Egypt, Aztecs, the Maya, the Indus Valley, Benin, Sumer or Assyria, and Romans as part of Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Vikings).

One notable project examined in the Ofsted report is an example of knowledge exchange across international boundaries but which touches on the histories of communities that are in reality or potentially citizen-stakeholders in Britain.

> Plans were in place for pupils in the school and in a partner school in Pakistan to study a comparative historical event in each country. The pupils in Pakistan would investigate the Viking invasion of Britain in

> AD 759 and those in England would study the Arab invasion of 712 CE. The project relied on using a range of digital resources for the pupils to share their findings with each other across both of the schools. At the heart of the planning, however, was a desire to improve pupils' understanding of the role of local history within a framework of national and international events. It focused on helping pupils to appreciate the similarities and differences in human development and activity and thus create greater understanding of the interrelationship between communities in different parts of the world.

The report offers much advice on good practice, both in the actual teaching and learning and in flexible curriculum structures. As in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Her Majesty's Inspectorate is in a position to advise the Government, and stop them from making false claims. An example of such is Michael Gove's address to the October 2010 Conservative Party Conference when he said that history teaching involved too much Hitler, a claim refuted by Ofsted. It is ironical too that poor old Henry VIII is also put into the category of being obsessively taught, especially when Simon Schama made so much of his reign in his *A History of Britain* television series. In the National Curriculum, for Key Stage 2 and 3, Henry VIII is not compulsory. His reign is an episode that can be set in a wider overview, linked to European history.

Niall Ferguson took his campaign one step further not only by openly criticising the Ofsted report on history, but by promoting as an example of potential good practice the ideas in his new book, *Civilization,* through what appeared to be a series of downloadable lesson plans (yet only the Y10 plan seemed available), which address his and Schama's concern that the 'long arc' of history was absent from classrooms.

From a policy point of view there are difficulties for Government when managing what has developed into a set of parallel and possibly conflicting discourses. One the one hand individual historians are, while still apparently working at the behest of Government on plans for a school history curriculum, undertaking individual campaigns in the press for their

own kinds of history, and even in one case, criticising a report by government inspectors. On the other hand, there are other individuals in the same *ad hoc* advisory group, with professional but not necessarily celebrity status, including senior figures in the Historical Association, who are offering advice in an environment with more collective responsibility and perhaps with more restraint and caution.

This wider debate, which now seems to have started, should include a consideration of whether the competitive Fergusonian approach to Westerners and 'Resterners' is appropriate if history is deemed to be a form of understanding, and with inclusivity playing such a vital part in education today, there is a need for some examination of the wisdom of discriminating against such large populations of the world, and giving them the status of losers. However an examination of differences between 'open' and 'closed' societies, in the context of their histories, would surely be valid.

## *Conclusions*

Although we are still in the early stages of the Review of the National Curriculum, there is now an ongoing and public debate in England about history in schools - as there was in Australia. A history curriculum is best seen as a framework within which a rigorous and creative history education can take place. Finding a balanced menu of chronological and geographical coverage and setting such considerations as the place of the nation in the world alongside a programme that offers opportunities for skills development (including the ability to write a narrative) and source-based inquiry, poses a challenge. The Australians have recognised that any list of milestones can be arbitrary and even absolutist if not modified by the possibility of questioning and investigation. They have also shown a commitment to the long arc of history by framing the first two years of secondary history education around ancient and medieval history, both of which have been set in contexts that include West and East. Politicians should spare time to look at the detail of previous curriculum versions and

not get the national curriculum (for *all* school students) confused with GCSE (where history is studied by a third or less) or even A Level. More school history is certainly desirable, and a solution which takes full entitlement beyond the age of 14 should indeed be found, as it has been in Australia. The issue of narrative coherence is one where there needs to be a clear set of principles for political intervention. The most effective kind of narrative-based teaching involves negotiation between narratives, and the exercise of this kind of judgement is best left to the professionalism of teachers, who can and do have access to the work of a range of historians. The privileging of a particular interpretation, which may in the short term seem to serve the interests of a political party, is not appropriate for a national curriculum.

While historians are 'indentured' to Government as part of an advisory group writing a national curriculum, they need perhaps to follow some kind of voluntary code of practice, and when writing in the press state that their views are their own, or show some kind of awareness that there is a great deal of difference between their own milestones and/or interpretations and an actual, workable school curriculum. In a sense there have been two categories of media engagement, one set - less invidious - about general approaches to the teaching of history, and the other, more dangerously, offering actual interpretations of the past for schools.

- Tags:
- Guyver, Robert
- Education

**Further Reading**


Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)

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## *Curricula*

The history curriculum at Key Stages 1 and 2 (England)

The Key Stage 3 history curriculum (England)

The Australian national curriculum for history

**About the author**

Robert Guyver is Senior Lecturer and Teaching Fellow at University College Plymouth St Mark and St John. He is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. After teaching in primary schools for 21 years, he was an advisory teacher in Essex, and since 1992 has worked in teacher education. He was a member of the Department for Education and Science National Curriculum History Working Group (1989-1990), and has recently co-edited *History Wars and the Classroom - Global Perspectives* with Associate Professor Tony Taylor of Monash University, Melbourne, who took a leading part in framing the Australian curriculum.
rguyver@marjon.ac.uk



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